

My Best Friend

People always say, "Never judge a book by its cover". Call me a drama queen, but whenever I hear the saying, I would feel a stake driving through my heart, followed by waves of immense guilt towards my dearest friend, Ann. Contrary to common belief, time does not heal anything- the guilt of ever judging someone by their cover remains in me, buried deep in my heart, till this day.

The first time I saw Ann was when I was eight. We had just been put into our new primary two classes and Ann happened to be my new classmate. Ann was tiny, frail-looking and had a huge mole on her face. The first thing that came to my mind when I saw her was, "She's so not going to be my friend. No way." I thought she looked horrible and wimpy, just totally not what I was looking for in a friend. I was mean to her and to put it frankly I was just a big, fat bully who deserved a tight slap across my face.

That continued and if Ann felt any resentment or hate towards me at all, she did not show it. She even attempted to be friendly and smiled at me whenever she saw me, but I heartlessly ignored her. At first I thought it was weird for her to behave like nothing had happened but after a while I just took advantage of her niceness. I laughed at her, I teased her in front of many classmates, I even stomped on her foot "by accident" because I thought it was funny. I thought it was really amusing to poke fun of such a small and frail-looking girl. It was unbelievably cruel of me.

One day, my form teacher approached me with a grim look on her face and I was terrified at first- had Ann finally plucked up enough courage to complain about me? Being the coward that I was on the inside, I was already trembling like a leaf. My teacher's next words allowed me to heave a sigh of relief- but not for long.

"Letitia, I want you to take care of Ann because she sits nearer to you. She just had a heart surgery and I want you to look out for her. Okay?"

I blinked at my teacher as her words slowly registered into my head. As they started to make sense I cast an astonished look towards Ann, who was sitting at her desk reading a book then. Ann? Heart surgery? Sure, Ann looked frail, but I didn't know she had a scary heart problem to deal with and had to go under the knife just for it! A shaky "okay" was all I could utter to my teacher before stumbling back to my seat. I felt sick, sick to the pit of my stomach. I had been mean to an innocent girl who had to deal with her scary heart surgery which must have taken her a lot of courage to face, as well as my nastiness. I had been mean to an innocent girl just because I thought she looked horrible and wimpy. All the while I had no idea what she was going through, the pain of undergoing surgery, her feelings.

I was such an unforgivable sinner.

Trying to be friendly with Ann was hard and awkward at first, because I was still feeling very much guilty and ashamed of myself. Being a shy girl Ann did not have many friends so I hung out with her during recesses. However, we did not have much to talk about and I realised that I knew nothing about Ann. There were many long, awkward silences between us that I hated and was very afraid of. I had even thought of giving up on being friends with her but I remembered the responsibility my form teacher entrusted me with and felt guilty almost immediately. However, as time passed, I realised Ann was caring, fun-loving, optimistic and calm, and when I ran into troubles or experienced unhappiness she would always be by my side, helping me out, comforting me.

There was once when I fell down during a PE lesson and Ann rushed to my side and helped me up, worry lines creasing her tiny face. I was hobbling painfully around because my knee was scraped and bleeding pretty badly. Ann offered to accompany me to the sick bay to get my wound disinfected and bandaged. I was pleasantly surprised because I never

thought she would come forward to help me when I was at the peak of my helplessness because we were not very close then. At that instant I felt very blessed to have a friend like her, a friend who would help me out when I got into trouble and would always stand by me, silently supporting me, caring for me. From then on the “gap” between Ann and I became much smaller and awkward silences became history. An amazing friendship started to develop between us. Soon, inseparable was what people called us.

I treasured Ann even more because I gradually understood that a friend like her is really hard to come by. Because of Ann, I understood a lot of things that had never come across to me as important before. She taught me a lot, and one of the lessons that had left the greatest impact on me was “never judge a book by its cover”.

I am proud to say that I had never done so ever since the fateful day, the day I came to know about Ann’s condition. After becoming best friends who treasured each other’s company I came to realise that Ann had what I was looking for in a friend. In fact, Ann was even better. Last Christmas I even got a Christmas card through the mail from her. Despite us being separate in different secondary schools Ann had never forgotten me.

You would have thought that I had probably apologised to Ann at some point in our friendship. Ironically, I never plucked up enough courage to apologise to her. She had never mentioned anything about me being a mean pig either. This makes me even more ashamed.

This friendship that Ann and I share is a very special one. Looks and appearances are also unimportant and insignificant in the realms of true, awesome friendship. This I believe.